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DEPT FOR EUR/WE CEVRETTI, DRL HEWITT

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TAGS: PREL PHUM KIRF IS VT

SUBJECT: HOLY SEE UPSET ABOUT ISRAELI SINGLE-ENTRY VISA POLICY FOR ARAB RELIGIOUS

REF: VATICAN 00170

CLASSIFIED BY: L. Francis Rooney, Ambassador, Embassy Vatican.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (U) Summary: The Holy See is upset about new Israeli visa policies that effectively limit the ability of the Church to serve the needs of Catholics in the Holy Land. The new Israeli visa policy comes at a time when Vatican diplomats are already expressing frustration over the lack of progress in the completion of arrangements encompassed under the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See. End summary.

¶2. (C) Monsignor Franco Coppola, the Holy See's Secretariat of State Middle East Director, told us November 14 that the Vatican is very concerned about Israel's newly instituted single-entry visa policy for Arab religious, which he said had adversely affected the ability of the Church to operate in Israel and the Occupied Territories. During a separate meeting on November 15 to discuss political events in Lebanon, Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Holy See's Secretary for Relations with States (i.e. foreign minister), raised with visiting NEA Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary David Satterfield these same concerns (reftel).

¶3. (C) Coppola explained that up until the summer of 2007, it was possible for Arab priests and religious to obtain Israeli multiple-entry visas. These allowed them to return to their pastoral duties in Israel following personal or official travel to countries in the region or beyond. This, Coppola said, is important because Israel and Jordan Latin-Rite Catholics are under a single diocese. Without multiple-entry visas, the ability of the Latin Patriarch to dispatch across the border priests under his authority is effectively curtailed.

¶4. (C) Coppola stated that non-Arab priests working in Israel, most of whom are westerners serving pilgrims or acting as custodians to the Holy Sites, are unaffected by the new policy. The pastoral needs of Arab Catholics in the Holy Land require, however, Arabic-speaking priests which are often Jordanians or from other Arab countries. It can take months, Coppola said, for them to obtain a visa for Israel. Additionally, he said, it is no longer possible to renew visas while in Israel, forcing some of these priests to leave Israel and remain outside while their new visas are processed.

¶ 15. (U) In a recent interview in L'Osservatore Romano (the Vatican newspaper) Cardinal Kasper, head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (which also deals with Christian-Jewish dialogue), said he had raised the visa issue with Israeli President Shimon Peres, who called on Pope Benedict XVI in September. Kasper thought that the Israelis "had taken to heart" finding a solution to the issue. At the same time, according to news reports, the Holy See Nuncio to the US, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, has stated that "relations between the Catholic Church and the state of Israel were better when there were no diplomatic relations," making reference to the visa issue and to other aspects of their bilateral relationship. Sambi's comments follow another press report in which the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem predicted that many parishes would be left without priests, and the patriarchate seminary closed if the policy is not changed by June.

¶ 16. (C) Comment: While the new Israeli visa policy is not related to the lack of progress in the completion of arrangements encompassed by the 1994 Fundamental Agreement that opened the door to Holy See relations with Israel, some Church officials see it as another indication of lukewarm support within Israel for closer bilateral relations with the Holy See. The Holy See has made it clear to us that it is disappointed with this turn of events, implicitly asking for USG help in resolving the situation. Post is supportive of this request.

ROONEY